



**E**lizabeth Jane Cochran, one of fifteen children, was the daughter of Michael Cochran and his second wife. Cochran was the foremost citizen in a town in Western Pennsylvania named after him. Cochran's Mills was Elizabeth's home until she and her mother, after the death of her father, moved to Pittsburgh. Her mother's second marriage was a disaster, and she was abused to the point where divorce seemed the only option. The move to Pittsburgh provided a new start for the family, but there were few financial prospects; Elizabeth helped run a boarding house, but a full-time job eluded her.

Elizabeth's dream was to become a writer and reporter in a profession dominated by men. When she was 19, Elizabeth read a story in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, arguing that women belonged in the home and not in jobs that would take work from men with families to support. The article also implied that the brains of females were inferior to those of males. This so angered Elizabeth that she wrote the editor of the paper, George Madden, a blistering reply in a letter that so impressed Madden that he hired her as a *Dispatch* reporter.

She spent most of her time writing for the women's page of the newspaper, and when she asked to write a story about the arcane divorce laws in Pennsylvania, it was decided that readers who knew Elizabeth Cochrane might have a problem

believing a young, unmarried woman could understand a great deal about divorce. She was given a pen name from a popular Stephen Foster song, *Nelly Bly*. The spelling was changed unintentionally to Nellie, and it stuck. Unable to get the newspaper to give her plum reporting assignments, Nellie Bly headed for New York, where she hoped to land a job as a reporter for one of many newspapers in that city.

Rebuffed initially at every newspaper, Nellie Bly found herself in the office of John Cockerill, managing editor of Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*. Pulitzer himself was there that day, and asked if she was up to reporting on conditions in the notorious New York mental institution, Blackwell's Island Lunatic Asylum. She accepted the challenge, and was given a small advance and the assignment. Nellie realized the only way to find out what was going on in this insane asylum was to pretend she was truly mad and get committed. It was arranged that after seven days, if she could stay there that long, lawyers from the newspaper would get her out.

Succeeding in convincing the authorities at Blackwell's Island that she was insane, she was admitted to an institution where inmates were beaten, given ice-cold baths, and fed food that Nellie deemed unfit for human consumption. People who were physically ill, but otherwise completely sane, were committed to

Blackwell's Island to get them away from families who no longer wanted to care for them. Nellie Bly survived the appalling conditions at the asylum for ten days, after which the lawyers from Pulitzer's newspaper obtained her release.

Nellie's story appeared in several installments in the *New York World*, and caused a sensation. Letters to the editor came in by the thousands, and politicians and city officials rushed to investigate the allegations and then make changes at Blackwell's Island. Pulitzer and the managing editor, John Cockerill, hired Nellie Bly and gave her a desk at the largest newspaper in the United States. She continued what became a crusade on behalf of the poor and downtrodden, and became famous in the bargain.

She traveled around the country as she profiled leaders like the boxer, John L. Sullivan and Susan B. Anthony, the suffragette. She wrote stories from the vantage point of workers and strikers in major cities, and was a contemporary of another female journalist and crusader, Ida Tarbell (also from Pennsylvania). Nellie's biggest claim to fame, perhaps, was

her trip around the world in an attempt to beat Phileas Fogg, in Jules Verne's "Around the World in Eighty Days." She saved several days off the time of that fictional trip, returning to New York in just over 72 days.

At the age of 30, Elizabeth Cochran, now famous worldwide as Nellie Bly, married an industrialist 40 years older than she. When he died, she ran his business until it failed, then returned to reporting for the *New York Journal*. Nellie died at the age of 57, in 1922, having contracted pneumonia.

Nelly Bly spent most of her adult life working and writing on behalf of those who could not fend for themselves, and devoted a good deal of time in her last years finding homes for children who had been abandoned. She was one among many journalists who fought corruption and championed the less fortunate using the pen as a catalyst for change and progress.

Fredeen, C. (2000). *Daredevil Reporter*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner.